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La Dolce Vita, Internet Style

Colletta di Castelbianco is a 13th-century Italian village that was on the verge of extinction -- until an architect gave it a new design and Internet connectivity gave it a new lease on life. The story of how it became a haven for mobile professionals.

From: [Issue 61](#) | August 2002 | Page 76 **By:** Ian Wylie **Photographs by:** Brian Doben

Florenzo was the last villager to leave. He was carried away by ambulance to end his days in an *ospedale* in Albenga. That was more than 20 years ago, and for most of the 20 years before that, the determined old hermit had been the life and soul of Colletta di Castelbianco, a mountain village in Italy's northwestern region of Liguria. Make that the only life and soul. Florenzo was literally the last person in Colletta, defying the forces that had pushed and pulled his fellow *Collettini* to settle in nearby Genoa, Marseilles, and Nice.

For seven centuries, Colletta had endured attack, famine, plague, and earthquake. The only force it couldn't repel was the economic progress of the 20th century. But Florenzo's departure was not the end of life in Colletta. Today, along the village's cobbled streets, Kieran, an Irish tax adviser, greets Olly, a Norwegian architect, with a hearty *Buon giorno*. Marco, a university professor from Torino, has an espresso with café owner Vincenzo before returning to his laptop to email his publisher. In Colletta, everything old is new again.

Built on a rugged spur some 1,000 feet above sea level, the 13th-century village is about to complete a remarkable renaissance. Colletta has been restored as a haven for mobile knowledge workers who want to live in medieval Italy but also want to remain connected to the rest of the world. No urban congestion, no suburban sprawl. Just a view of the maritime Alps that hasn't changed in more than a thousand years -- plus a lightning-fast Internet connection.

A 10-year labor of love nurtured by a group of local developers, who are diligent students of the past and the future, Colletta has gone broadband. It's now a *cybervillaggio* with 60 apartments equipped for always-on Internet; satellite TV; ISDN, phone, and video-cable connections -- perfect for the well-connected professional in search of a getaway. "We can get a half-year's work done here in the space of two months," says Kieran O'Donnell, who purchased one of the first apartments in late 1999. He and his wife, Joanne, decided to run their UK-based tax-consultancy and property-development businesses from Colletta after traveling around the United States and Europe scouting different locations. "The peaceful environment lends itself to intense working," says O'Donnell. "And when you take a breather, you find yourself walking the routes that people walked 800 years ago."

Colletta cannot claim to be the first cybervillage in Europe. British developer Ashley Dobbs was sketching out plans

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for televillages in rural England as early as the mid-1980s. Nor is it the most advanced. That prize goes to Nokia's wireless Helsinki suburb, Arabianranta. But Colletta is an extraordinary experiment in technology-led restoration, largely by virtue of its fusion of old and new, community and productivity.

Colletta's ancient dwellings were barely visible when land surveyor Alessandro Pampirio and two colleagues stumbled upon the village during a Sunday stroll back in 1991. "It took a lot of creativity to imagine what it was like then, under so much vegetation," he says. "But we found a terrace, sat down, and said, 'Thank you, God.' "

The trio bought what remained of Colletta for around \$2 million and convinced Telecom Italia that wiring a medieval village would make for good PR. Then they scored a coup by securing the services of one of the country's most venerable architects, Giancarlo De Carlo, who had revitalized the ancient city of Urbino. "When I saw the village, I was surprised by its beauty," says De Carlo. "But I also liked the economy of its medieval architecture. The size of the houses was perfect. And because they had first-, middle-, and top-floor entrances, it was possible to organize the living spaces in a very interesting way."

As De Carlo toured the ruins, he laid down a couple of design principles. First, Colletta wouldn't be some hive for home-working hermits, but a proper community. Second, since the shells of most of the buildings were intact, the village would be restored using only original techniques and materials.

De Carlo demanded control of every detail, down to each tree within a 300-foot radius of the village's center. "There was a nostalgia for stone," he says. "I decided that the modernity of the village would be in its organization." De Carlo's conversion of Colletta's buildings into apartments followed what he calls a "crustacean" system of interlocking cells that can expand or contract to suit the needs of the household. Each unit has all of the essentials: a kitchen, a bathroom, a bedroom, a terrace, and, in some cases, a small garden. Given their rustic exteriors, the apartments are deceptively roomy, stylish, and comfortable, with shuttered doors and windows, vaulted arches, and under-floor heating.

Meanwhile, underneath the village, a 10-mile network of fiber optics and copper delivers a level of connectivity that the largest Italian cities would envy. Each home in Colletta has an Internet line, an ISDN port that supports videophone and videoconferencing services, a radiophone for use around the village, and cable for video-on-demand and interactive TV.

De Carlo has ensured that Colletta's technology is invisible. Even the antenna for the radiophones is camouflaged to blend in with the gray stone. Whether walking the labyrinth of lanes and pathways or climbing the tangle of stairs and bridges, visitors are plunged back in time. "I like to think back to what Colletta was like in its heyday in the 18th or 19th century, when it was home to 700 or 800 people," says Pampirio.

To be sure, creating a community isn't as easy as laying down fiber. Three-quarters of the apartments are spoken for, bought by professors, financiers, architects, builders, surgeons, entrepreneurs, wine makers, and writers. The new Collettini have more in common with one another than they do with the local farmers who raise flowers, fruits, and vegetables. Most are middle-aged, and the majority are relatively affluent (apartments cost between \$140,000 and \$330,000). Residents are encouraged to tear themselves away from their computers and TVs and socialize. Massimo Vindrola, the village's *procaccia* (a combination mayor and caretaker), hosts parties for new home owners, inviting the entire village. Plays are organized for the amphitheater, open-air concerts take place in the piazza, and bathers relax together at the outdoor pool.

Unfortunately, Colletta runs the risk of becoming more of a destination or weekend resort than a genuine community. Many of the Italian owners bought the apartments to use as summer homes. Those who bought them for work tend to come for a month or six weeks to immerse themselves in a project. "Most of the time, we have the place pretty much to ourselves," says O'Donnell. "It's a bit of a disappointment that people haven't really embraced the concept of a village. The Italians come here for a month in August and work, but the majority of the properties are empty for the rest of the year."

But Pampirio insists that the Colletta experiment is a work in progress and that the 800-year-old village is just beginning to establish the new rhythms of life there. "Teleworking in Italy is still in its infancy," says the developer, who is planning a similar project elsewhere in Liguria.

Televillage pioneer Dobbs, who has had his share of setbacks, believes that the reach of global-communications technology will support a return to village life. "Communities like Colletta need at least 10 years before you can

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judge whether they are a success or not," he says. "But living and working in the same community is a tried-and-tested formula, and televillages are a model for future communities."

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